

He's Not Here by UnintendedTrustfall

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Summary:

Steve Harrington defended the people he cared about, there wasn't a question. But when he gets pulled into the Upside Down, the roles might need to be reversed

Or

Steve doesn't see much worth in his life and gets some help from Nancy and the kids to remind him that he matters to people.

1. He's Not Here

Steve never expected half the things that had happened to him this year and a half to happen. Or even be real.

A kid went missing. In Hawkins, of all places.

Nancy Wheeler could shotgun a beer. Better than he expected. But she could do anything.

Barb Holland went missing. Last seen at his party. And she was probably dead.

Jonathan Byers could throw a punch. Or a dozen. If you got him upset enough.

He, King of Hawkins, Steve Harrington, was wrong. And his friends were assholes. And he needed to be better.

Monsters were real.

Monsters were real.

Or aliens.

Or ghosts.

Or something.

Whatever these things were, whatever that place was that the things were from-- that place where Barb disappeared to. And Jonathan's little brother. Where a little girl with a shaved head could go to. It was all real.

And Steve could beat those monsters with a bat.

It had been an instinct, the first time.

It didn't matter that it was a monster and monsters were real. What mattered was that the thing was trying to attack Nancy. And Jonathan. And Steve wasn't going to let that happen.

Of course it shocked and terrified and panicked him that these things were real. But he had to act. Panicked or not.

So that's what he did.

And then when it came to the kids, the same instinct kicked in.

Monsters? No fuckin' problem. It was that other unknown that actually scared him.

Monsters could be beaten into a slimy pulp. Monsters could be killed.

That place though, the place they'd come from, that scared him.

The Upside Down, they called it.

Barb had died there.

Will had come back, but that place still haunted him. Tormented him. Possessed him.

Even Nancy had seen it. Briefly. After crawling through some portal in the woods, apparently.

But Steve had only fought it from Hawkins.

It had come for Eleven. It had come for Will. It had come for Barb. It had come for Jonathan and Nancy. It had come for the kids.

And now it was coming for him.

"You want this, huh?!" He yelled, nail-stuck bat balanced on his shoulder, staring into the face of this real, for real monster.

It screeched, revealing a wide slimy mouth that shouldn't have been real.

"Steve, watch out!" Dustin shouted. But Steve turned too late.

-X-

He woke up and he was cold. He was so, so, so goddamn cold. Jesus, he didn't know he could be this cold.

He was wet, soaked to the bone with slime coating his frozen clothes. He began to sit up and his head ached. No, it didn't just ache, It throbbed. It was like a consistent, pounding pain in his temples. In his neck. His back. His chest. His eyes. His everywhere.

But he needed to get to the kids. If he'd been out long enough to get this cold, the little shits had been left without him for too long, and they could be in trouble.

He made to sit up again and he threw up. He spit, and found his hands on the frozen ground, pushing him up.

He staggered to his feet and nearly pitched forward, like he was wasted. He steadied himself, leaning against a tree he didn't recognize and he looked around.

He didn't recognize any of this at all.

"Dustin?" He called out, and his voice sounded wrong. Scratchy. Dry. Exhausted. "Nancy?!"

He knew Nancy wasn't with him, but her name came as naturally to him as when he'd called for her when he was crammed into the back of Billy Hargrove's car with 13 year-old Maxine behind the wheel.

This place didn't look right.

"Guys?!" He called out, and then he started to panic because *he didn't know this place*, "GUYS!!"

-X-

"Wake him up! Wake him up! Why won't he wake up?!" Dustin was rambling, shaking Steve, looking desperately to the others for help.

"What happened to him?" Mike asked, crouching down next to Dustin.

"Stop shaking him, what if he hit his head?!" Lucas pointed out and Dustin stopped shaking him but held on for dear life.

"Dustin, what's wrong with him?!" Max demanded, looking nervous,

herself.

Steve was slumped against a real tree, on the real earth. His head was lolling to one side on his shoulder and his eyes were darting wildly beneath his eyelids.

"He's not here."

The kids jumped and turned to see Eleven standing behind them.

"El? What'd you mean?!" Mike asked, half rising to meet her.

She came forward and she pointed at Steve, "He's not here."

Max looked from Eleven to Mike and then back to Lucas and Dustin.

"What's she talking about?"

"The Bad Place? Is he in the Upside Down?" Mike asked, staring at Eleven.

She nodded.

She glanced sideways at Steve.

"He's in the Bad Place."

2. The Bad Place

"He's in the Bad Place."

Steve didn't even want to-- couldn't even want to know what the moniker meant. The Bad Place. He wasn't sure if it was the vagueness in the girl's terminology or the fact that she literally said *bad* place that made this situation all the more terrifying.

"GUYS!!" Steve called out again through a strange film that he could vaguely see the girl who'd spoken-- Eleven, they called her-- and the other kids: Dustin, Lucas, Max, and Mike.

Eleven was the only one who seemed to react. She flinched and turned back, as though she were looking right at him. But she didn't seem to be actually seeing him.

"El? What is it? Can you see him?" Mike was asking. His tone implied he was more interested in the fact that she had this power than that Steve might be close by. But Steve didn't give a shit, he just needed to be found. It was getting colder.

"He's..." El began and it looked like she was struggling, trying to see him, *"...I can't find him."*

Dustin looked incredulously from Eleven to Mike.

"'Can't find him'?! Go in after him! We don't leave party members behind!" Dustin was practically yelling and Eleven looked hurt.

"Hey!" Steve said, but the hoarseness in his voice took away a lot of its authority, "Don't yell at her--"

SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEECH!

Steve froze.

He turned his head slowly to his left and found himself staring directly into the--the face?-- of a demo... dog. Its mouth was wide open, teeth turned out, ready to attack.

"Oh, shit..." Steve whispered to himself and the demodog was charging.

He felt a sharp shot of terror in his chest and he was running before he could even think to do it.

He didn't know where he was going or how he was gonna stop this thing, especially without his bat. But he hoped beyond hope that the kids would get help. Because they couldn't hang around here if these things were around. So if he had to keep this thing busy until they got out of those woods, he guessed that's what he'd have to do.

-X-

"No!"

"Lucas, c'mon, do you see any other way?"

Lucas shook his head as Dustin and Mike dragged Steve's twitching body back to his car.

"Do you not remember how mad he got last time? What if he tells our parents?!" Lucas argued.

He looked to Max for help but she was already in the car, adjusting the positioning of the driver's seat.

"Oh, c'mon!" Lucas shook his head and turned to Eleven, "El? Can you do anything?"

She blinked, pointed at Steve and repeated, "He's in the Bad Place."

Lucas raised his hands in disbelief, turning away.

"Are you guys serious?!"

But Mike was already helping El into the car. Dustin was situating Steve in the back--again-- and Max was looking through Steve's key ring for the right one.

"God... dammit..." Lucas mumbled and climbed into the car.

-x-

Steve's awareness came back slowly, but in painful waves of nausea and pain. He kept being pulled towards consciousness with increasingly urgent spikes of pain in his head, his chest, his everywhere.

Finally he coughed up, spit up, threw up, some blood and bile and ash. He blinked his eyes open and really didn't recognize this freezing, dark wooded area where he now found himself.

"He's in the Bad Place."

Oh, god, no.

Panic hit him hard and the realization came at him slower than it should have. He figured he must've hit his head pretty bad for it to have taken this long to realize. This was the Upside Down.

Home to the Demogorgan. Where all those... demodogs had come from. The one thing about this whole mess that had really scared Steve, and he had gotten trapped here.

His breath hitched in his throat at that thought-- not trapped, he told himself, not trapped, just lost. Oh, fuck. This was not good.

He was really cold now. He felt like his body was shutting down. This is definitely not good.

"CAN ANYBODY HEAR ME?!?"

-x-

"Mike?!"

"Oh, shit..." Mike muttered to himself. His parents were supposed to be at Mr. Wheeler's work party tonight. But he hadn't thought about Nancy being home, even though she'd been left in charge, he'd just expected her to have snuck out already.

She came running out the front door as Max jerked the car into park.

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MINDS?!"

"Nance--! Shh, hang on, just--"

"STEVE?!"

She was running to the side door and pulling it open. She half climbed inside to shake Steve but he didn't react. She felt neck for a pulse and then rounded on the five of them.

"What's wrong with him?! What the hell were you thinking?!" She was shaking with tears of frustration or fear or both. "Mike, you'd better answer me right--!"

"NANCY." Mike said, taking her shoulders, "He got taken."

Nancy half laughed hysterically, tears leaking from her eyes.

"What are you talking about?! He's right here!"

"No! It's like Will! He's not--"

"He's not here." Eleven said tonelessly, getting out of the car, blood spilling from her nose.

Nancy stared at her.

"Where is he? Is he okay?"

Eleven's eyes shined and she frowned helplessly, shaking her head.

"No."

3. Worthless

His mind was turning on him. The longer he wandered through the dark, freezing forest that shouldn't exist, the more hopeless he became.

But it wasn't just hope. It was the crushing depression that this place instilled him with. The unrelenting thought that he was trapped here with all his greatest fears.

He was afraid of the unknown. That was the first one. He could fight it, as long as it was physical, but the soul crushing feeling of this place was what actually scared him. Second, he was afraid of being alone. Not because he was scared to face the Demogorgan alone or afraid to die alone. He was afraid of the inability to distance himself from everything that was happening. Everything that *had* happened. He was afraid that he couldn't detach himself.

That's what he was used to doing. It was how he dealt with everything in his life. How he'd dealt with his parents never being there, with his dad thinking he wasn't good enough, with *knowing* he wasn't good enough, with breaking it off with every girl he'd ever hooked up with.

Except for Nancy. He couldn't detach himself from that heartbreak either. And how he was trapped here. Alone. And she wasn't there to light up his life when he felt alone. She wasn't there to care.

She didn't care.

She shouldn't.

He knew these thoughts that were eating away at him were just in his head. That maybe she did care. *She shouldn't.* And maybe he was good enough. *You're not.* And maybe he would find a way out of here.

You won't.

-X-

Nancy and the kids had managed to get Steve inside onto the couch,

but he was still completely unresponsive.

His eyes darted beneath his eyelids like he was running from something. But they'd slowed over time. And he was getting colder. They'd piled blankets on him and lit the fireplace, but he looked close to hypothermic.

"We need to call Hopper!" Nancy was rambling, pacing, stressed, "Or-- or Joyce or Jonathan or--"

"Nancy!" Mike shouted, taking her shoulders again, "We don't have time! He's literally freezing to death! We have to go get him!"

Nancy waved her hand wildly in Steve's direction, "How the hell are we going to do that?! He's not even in there, he's here, I don't... I mean, Will was possessed! Steve's... he's..." she trailed off, her eyes settling on Steve, and she had tears in her eyes again. "What happened?"

Mike opened his mouth and closed it. He didn't know what to say.

"He got attacked," Max said slowly, "By a... a, uh..."

"A demodog." Dustin offered weakly, his eyes resting on Steve's unconscious form too.

"It like... opened its mouth at him... like it was gonna eat him, but it... It just had this... light... coming out of its mouth and it... I don't know..." Max looked helplessly to Lucas but he just shrugged, as helpless as she was.

"He was protecting us." Lucas said, not looking at anyone, "Like he always does."

"El," Mike said, turning to her, his voice shaking, "What do we do? How do we get to him?"

Eleven went to Steve's side and laid her hand over his. She closed her eyes.

-x-

"Steve?"

You're never getting out of here. And why should you? Who would come for you?

"STEVE?!"

Your mom barely knows you. Your dad thinks you're worthless. You are worthless.

If your parents cared about you, they wouldn't leave all the time.
If your parents cared about you, you wouldn't spend every Christmas alone or with the Wheelers.

If Nancy cared about you, she shouldn't.

Because you're worthless. You're not smart. You're not kind. You're just as much of an asshole and as miserable as you said Tommy and Carol are. No one cares about you.

And they shouldn't.

-x-

Eleven's eyes snapped open as she gasped, blood seeping from her nostril.

"El, what is it?! Where is he?!"

She blinked, staring at Mike.

"He won't come to me."

Nancy stared from Mike to Eleven.

"What does that mean?"

"He's trapped there." Eleven said, turning to Nancy, "And he won't listen to me."

"You've gotta talk to him." Mike said suddenly, "Like with Will, we've gotta talk to him, we've gotta make him hear us."

4. Persistence

Nancy and the kids hovered around Steve who was propped up on the couch but his slowly shifting eyes between his eyelids didn't stop moving. He didn't open his eyes, but he didn't stop seeing either.

He just didn't see *them*.

"Nancy," Mike finally said, breaking the silence. "You've gotta talk to him."

She turned on her little brother, looking hurt and worried and irritated and upset.

"And say what? He's not gonna want to hear from me, he--"

"He said it was 'okay' though, Nancy!!" Dustin burst out, "He said it was 'okay'!"

Nancy stared at Dustin and then looked to Steve.

"But... *he* wasn't."

Dustin shook his head, grasping his hair. Steve's love life never ceased to frustrate the everliving hell out of him. And now was not the time for "will they, won't they". He knew she could get through to him, but he also knew what Lucas, who was staring at him was thinking. That Dustin could get to him too.

But for once in his life, Dustin didn't know what to say.

-x-

"HELLOOOOOOOO?!" Steve was calling out, his voice hoarse and scratchy from both the shouting and the dehydration.

Every part of his body was screaming for him to give up. Give in. Let himself die down here and then he'd be free of this. *All* of it.

Free of the fact that Nancy wanted Jonathan and not him and that the only person Steve could blame was himself.

Free of the fact that he had been an asshole and he'd hung out with asshole friends and the only person he could blame was himself.

He'd lost the love of his life, his social status, his social life, and it was all his fault.

He had no chance at getting into college now. His college application essays had been shit and his grades were even worse-- what his dad had always told him was true: he wasn't going anywhere and he was worthless.

His dad had trained him to know that he was worthless and that he'd never get a job outside of his dad's company. He was doomed to follow in his father's footsteps and the thought made him sick and tired and made him feel like he wanted to be swallowed whole by this place. He didn't want to get out if he'd just be alone again.

-x-

The kids had lit up the fireplace and got all the lights pointed at Steve. They didn't think he was possessed by the Demogorgan-- or whatever had happened to Will-- but they knew that Steve was cold and he'd been attacked by a demodog. So all signs were pointing towards him being trapped in the Upside Down.

"We've gotta talk to him... right?" Mike asked, turning to Eleven, "Like with Will?"

"Not like with Will." Eleven said flatly, staring at Steve, looking troubled.

She had this look that she hadn't seemed able to shake since she'd tried to find him. Mike just stared helplessly at her, waiting for her to continue. But Dustin didn't have that kind of patience.

"Okay, what does that *mean*?" He demanded, looking near tears.

"Not trapped," Eleven said and then she turned to Dustin, "He won't come."

Nancy stood up and left the room.

-X-

Mike, Eleven, Dustin, Lucas, and Max were all situated around Steve, staring at him.

"What type of shit am I supposed to say?" Dustin whispered to the others, staring fearfully at Steve.

"I don't know! You know him better than I do!" Mike said.

"He was your sister's boyfriend!" Dustin said.

"Yeah, my *sister's*, so maybe she should--!"

"Just talk to him!" Max shouted over them and then Lucas cut in.

"Steve," Lucas began awkwardly, "I know, uh... I know we don't really know each other that well and... and I thought you were kind of a dick before but... you saved us." he chewed his lip uncomfortably and said, "You saved... you saved *me*, and uh... I never really got to... to thank you for that..."

Lucas smirked to himself looking down he continued, "I don't know if this really counts either since you're... not really *here* right now, but... I hope you can hear me... because I'm not thanking you again." He smiled again and then looked back up at Steve, "But I don't like to admit it but you saved my ass, Harrington, and there's still demodogs out here to fight so... we need you back."

Max was smiling to herself in the background, and Dustin saw her watching Lucas speak with such a fondness that he knew she never had for him. And he headed to the kitchen after Nancy.

-X-

Nancy was standing at the sink, head bowed like she was crying and Dustin was almost embarrassed to find her so vulnerable like this. So he cleared his throat with a loud, obvious *hem hem*, hoping she'd be willing to talk to him.

She jumped a little, and wiped her eyes on the back of her hand, turning to face him, leaning against the counter.

"Nancy..." he began, watching her fight to put on a strong face, "...We can still get him back!"

She smiled weakly, wiping away new tears.

"I hurt him. I didn't mean to, but I hurt him and now he--!" She trailed off, looking over where Eleven was, "Now he's just gonna let himself die in there... he's not... he wasn't in a great way when... when we broke up. He... he doesn't think that much of himself and... and he wouldn't talk about it after all of the..." Nancy trailed off again, and then she forced herself to look at Dustin again, "I don't know how we could get him back."

Dustin smiled weakly at her, "Well if he wouldn't talk before... we're gonna make him talk now."

5. Fading

Steve felt like he'd been hit with the worst flu he could've imagined. His body ached. His head ached. Shit, even his eyes ached. And the cold, chilling him all the way to the bone was no help. He just felt so tired and cold and sick.

He'd practically given up by now.

He was huddled pathetically against one of what had to be thousands of crooked trees in this freezing no man's land, with a bad headache and blood in his hair and his mouth. He could barely remember when he'd hit his head, it felt like so long ago. And the series of falls and attacks seemed to have resulted in this constant, intense pain in his ribs. He could barely breathe.

It was too much energy to shout out for anybody anymore and it didn't seem like there was much use to it anyway. He was lost.

You should be.

Nobody was coming for him. Nobody cared.

They shouldn't.

Why had he ever expected that anyone might come looking for him? Or even notice he was gone? Or care that he was gone--

"You saved..."

Steve's heart skipped. That voice wasn't from in his head. That voice was real. It was...

"You saved me."

Sinclair.

"I never really got to thank you for that."

Lucas Sinclair.

They were trying to get to him. Lucas was trying to get to him.

But the cold and the darkness were taking him. And he wasn't sure if they'd reach him in time.

-x-

Dustin sat down on the ottoman across from Steve, looking to Lucas and back nervously.

"Hey... hey, buddy." He began awkwardly, "I uh... I know it's gotta be pretty bad down there. I mean... Will was pretty messed up by it, and uh... El doesn't like to talk about it, so..." Dustin pushed his hat back, tearing up against his best efforts to stop it and choked, "You've gotta come back. You... you've just... we're all out here for you, buddy. I don't know... what exactly is going on with you or anything but... we're all out here for you... so... please. I-- we just... we need you back."

Dustin fell silent and Steve's apparent lack of response seemed to hurt him. He stood up, swallowing and made to leave. Max turned towards him and said,

"Dustin! You can't just walk out on--"

"He can't hear me! And-- and what'd you care anyway? You barely even know him!"

-x-

"We need you back."

"You barely even know him!"

Steve was gasping for breaths that wouldn't come as he crawled through the frozen woods. The slime that covered his clothes and his skin had seemed to seep through his pores, filling him with ice and fear and dread. He wanted to get out. He wanted to get back to the kids.

But you don't deserve it.

He wanted to get out but they could never make it to him. He was too deep in this place and he was so cold... so cold, and the crushing feeling of this place was leaving him near paralyzed as he crawled through it, desperately trying to escape.

-x-

"Don't be stupid, Harrington." Max said softly, sitting directly across from Steve.

Lucas had gone out front after Dustin, and Mike was just sitting silently in the corner with Eleven as she tried and failed to find Steve with her mind.

Max appreciated the privacy while she tried to get her message across to Steve. She wanted him to know, like Lucas had, that he'd saved them. He'd protected them. And she didn't fully understand why he wouldn't wake up or what it meant to be trapped in this weird alternate dimension the others talked about. But Steve's eyes were barely moving beneath his eyelids now, and despite the blazing fire in the fireplace and the pile of blankets and quilts and sheets they'd covered him with, his skin felt like ice.

"You saved Lucas, which I guess is pretty cool." She said, unable to actually look at him, "You got your ass kicked by my stepbrother and still came back for us, so... either you're crazy or you're a hero, so... I guess you're pretty crazy."

She opened her mouth to speak and closed it. What else could she say?

-x-

"You're either crazy or you're a hero, so... I guess you're pretty crazy."

Steve crawled towards Lucas and Dustin and Max's voices. Crawled towards Eleven's reach. Crawled towards Mike's doubts.

But the cold was too much and the shaking in his body was shutting down. Everything was shutting down. The darkness that surrounded him was ready to swallow him whole.

Nancy felt every instinct pushing her to run. She hadn't been able to save Barb and she was afraid that anything she said to Steve might drive him further away. She didn't like how they'd left things, but it happened, and she didn't think anything she said now, so desperate and obvious would do anything but break him now.

You don't love me?

She honestly hadn't known at that point. She was hurt that he'd tried to make her forget about Barb. This wasn't like when he failed a test or lost a basketball game. This wasn't like when his parents left him town or when he got in trouble for throwing parties. This wasn't something she could bury and forget about-- distracting herself with movies and parties and popularity, like he did.

In his way, she supposed, he'd been trying to help. But she couldn't forget about how he'd made fun of her with his friends or humiliated her in front of the whole town. How he'd been a dick to Jonathan or about Tommy and Carol. She couldn't just forget about how he'd been more worried about his parents finding out about the party than about the fact that Barb was missing.

And she couldn't just forget about Barb.

But as she thought it through and thought it through, she knew if they didn't do something, she'd lose Steve too.

6. The Upside Down

THE UPSIDE

Mike sat down on the empty ottoman in front of Steve. He stared at the teen whose eyes barely moved beneath his lids, whose skin was ice to the touch, whose skin was pale and clammy.

The guy who his sister had dated and then not dated and then dated and then not dated again? The guy who'd been called 'King Steve' and then the guy whose crown had been taken. The guy who was an idiot jock. The guy who threw parties and played girls until apparently he fell for his sister. The guy who was a jealous dick. The guy who was a dick to Will's brother. The guy who fought the Demogorgan with a nail bat before he knew what it was. The guy who saved Nancy and Jonathan. The guy who apologized. The guy who came back.

The guy who for whatever reason, Dustin was now so fond of. The guy who saved Lucas and Max from Billy. The guy who'd woken up, concussed and disoriented as all hell and called him 'Nancy'. The guy who'd protected them in the tunnels. The guy who had saved him.

Mike took a deep breath. Holy shit, he really didn't know how to talk to this guy. But whether Mike liked it or not, Steve had earned his spot as a party member. And party members don't get left behind.

"Steve." He began awkwardly, leaning in to keep it just between them, "I... this is stupid. You need to wake up, okay? You saved Nancy. And Jonathan. And Lucas. And Max. And Dustin. And... and me. And I just... we don't... we don't leave party members behind, okay? So you've gotta come back to us... you've gotta."

-x-

"We don't leave party members behind"

If Steve had the strength, he would've laughed. Nancy's brother *hated* him, he knew that. But more than him, he hated letting new people into the party, according to Dustin. He'd been extremely cautious of letting Eleven into the party at first, and up until the night they shut

the Gate, he'd been pretty closed off to letting Max join. And here Steve was, a 17-year old dickhead who'd been dating Mike's sister and he was just *given* a spot on the team.

And he would never admit it, but he was touched.

-x-

Nancy had waited for the waterworks to come but they never did. She got teary, her eyes misted, but she didn't cry. But she knew once she started talking to Steve that the dam would break, and maybe that's why it took her so long to do it.

She took a deep breath as she came back to the living room, and she saw her little brother sitting across from Steve so she stopped. She hesitated and stopped in the doorway, not wanting to embarrass or interrupt him in this.

"You've gotta come back to us... you've gotta." Mike said and then he said, "Don't you get it?! We *need* you! I thought we should leave you behind, I thought... I thought you'd hold us back or wouldn't let us go but if you weren't there, I could be dead!"

Nancy felt her heart drop. She'd heard after the Gate closed that Mike and his friends and Steve had gone down to the tunnels. She'd heard that, at least according to Dustin, Steve had been badass. But she didn't know he'd actually saved them.

Mike stood up abruptly and he wiped his eyes. He wiped *tears* from his eyes-- Nancy almost started crying right then because Mike hadn't even liked Steve. Mike turned away from Steve, not noticing Nancy, and went to his room. Eleven watched him go, looked to Nancy, and then closed her eyes again.

Nancy figured this was about as much privacy as she was going to get and if she didn't say something now, she might never get to. And she couldn't do that again.

She took her brother's place on the ottoman and cleared her throat, staring down at her hands.

"Steve, I need you to listen to me." She sniffed and then looked up,

staring him in the face, "I know... I know you think you're trapped in there, but you've gotta listen to us, you're not. You're not alone. You're not nothing. You're not..."

She felt the hot tears coming to her eyes again but they wouldn't fall.

"You're not *bullshit*."

She bit her lip and placing her hand over his she continued, "I was upset, okay? My best friend... Barb was-- and her parents were still looking for her! And you wanted me to forget about her! You told me to pretend!"

The tears fell now and she hurt for Barb and the Hollands and she hurt for Steve.

"But I couldn't pretend... I can't... and I know, that's... that's what you do when life is... is bullshit. But you can't pretend anymore, Steve, it's killing you."

Her eyes were drawn to his closed lids where his eye movement had come to a complete stop. He wasn't seeing anything anymore.

"Steve?" Nancy felt his pulse and it had all but stopped, it was so slow, and his hand was so cold, "Steve!!"

Eleven came to Nancy's side and Nancy turned to her helplessly.

"Why won't he wake up?! What do I do?!"

Eleven stared at Nancy with blood seeping from her nostril and the wallpaper burst open to their left and Nancy saw the same portal she remembered from the woods.

"We have to save him." Eleven said.

DOWN

"You're not *bullshit*"

Yes, you are.

Steve couldn't shiver anymore, his body was shutting down. He could feel it in the nothingness he was beginning to feel. The pain and confusion that rocked his head from earlier had dissipated into this floaty, disconnected feeling he felt now. He didn't feel a part of his bruised, battered, and frozen body now. He felt like he was breaking free from it.

Like you're dying.

-x-

"Holy shit!" Dustin burst out, staring in something like awe and fear into the wobbling portal in the wall.

"Mom's gonna lose her shit." Mike whispered, staring horrified at it.

"Not if you don't rip the wallpaper." Dustin said, eyes fixed on the hole, clearly working out the best way to climb through it.

Mike looked from Dustin to the rest of the group.

"We're not going in there!"

"Mike, we have to!" Dustin said.

Max glanced sideways from the portal to Dustin, "I don't know... I might be with Mike on this one--"

"We don't leave party members behind." Lucas said, cutting her off, "We have to go after him."

Max opened her mouth to respond and closed it. She sighed and said, "Alright, what'd we need?"

-x-

"Steve?!"

It's not real, it's not real, it's not real.

"STEVE!!"

It's not real, it's not real, it's not real, it's not real, it's not real, it's not--

Through the darkness, Steve saw a bright, burning light.

This is it, he thought, this is death.

"STEVE!!"

Except that light looked a whole lot like a fire... and smelled like a tree burning. What the hell--

"Guys!! He's over there, I see him!"

That was Lucas' voice. So Lucas had found him. Steve made a mental note to bump Lucas up next to Dustin on his favorite kid list. But they had all been his favorites, truth be told.

"Oh, shit..." Dustin was saying and Steve could distantly feel people on him, trying to sit him up. It made him nauseous and he had to clench his jaw to steady himself, although his muscles weren't completely cooperating at the moment.

"Steve?"

Nancy?

No. Think of last time. It wasn't her then, and it isn't her now. She doesn't care about you. She shouldn't--

"Steve, wake up!"

That sure sounded a helluva lot like Nancy though.

His vision focused a little and he saw... Nancy. And Lucas and Dustin and Eleven and Mike and Max. They were all here.

Unless this is what dying felt like. Unless this was his life flashing before his eyes and he was seeing the good before it all disappeared. And he sure as shit felt like he was disappearing-- sinking into the cold and darkness that had seemed to have become a part of him now.

"Steve!! C'mon, don't close your eyes!"

It's not real. It's not real. This is just the highlight reel of your life-- a pack of middle schoolers, a psychic kid, and your ex girlfriend-- and it's all about to end--

SHHHIIITTTT!!

His eyes snapped open and he felt a sharp, cold-- no, hot surge of pain run through his body, making sweat bead at his forehead and back. His eyes were drawn instinctively to the source of the pain and he found his own Zippo lighter burning a welt in his arm. Dustin quickly pulled it away as Steve shot upright, adrenaline spiking through him.

"HoLY SHIIT!!" Steve shouted, scrambling to sit up.

He looked like hell. His hair was messed up in all directions, he was pale with blue tinged lips, and his body was trembling violently. The startling pain had brought him to temporary coherency, but exhaustion was creeping at the corners of his consciousness, and Nancy seemed to see that.

"Steve, c'mon, hey! Stay awake, okay?" She was saying, holding his shoulders as the kids supported him in sitting up.

"You fuckin'... *burnt* me..." Steve mumbled at Dustin as he followed their lead, finding his footing, "With my own lighter..."

Nancy smiled a little and Dustin said, "Hey, asshole, you left it with me when you pulled that Kamikaze stunt, alright? So how about you just shut up and let us save your ass?"

Steve blinked dizzily, leaning heavily on Mike and Lucas as the other kids and Nancy helped him to his feet.

7. Bearings

Steve wasn't sure how long he'd been out. He wasn't sure how he'd gotten where he was now, what was going on, or who was with him. All he did know, was that he was right side up.

The first thing he could grasp real consciousness of was that he couldn't move. Not like he was paralyzed, he was relieved to find, but like he was buried, and that stripped any relief he'd found away. He attempted to break free of this whatever it was, thrashing and twisting. But the voice overtop of him was getting louder and clearer, and finally Nancy's voice broke through, saying,

"Steve!! ...it's okay! You're okay..."

Nancy.

He managed to blink his eyes open, relaxing as he felt her sitting next to him on what he could now see was Nancy's bed. He was buried beneath a pile of blankets, carefully tucked around him, preventing any heat from escaping.

Nancy was gently smoothing his hair back on his forehead and her touch allowed him to relax, to some extent. He still didn't understand-- had they really gotten him out? Wait. They-- where were the kids?

He struggled to sit up as Nancy tried to stop him. But he pushed off some of the blankets, forcing himself at least semi upright and was weakly saying,

"The kids... where... where are they--"

"They're fine," Nancy cut him off, trying relieve some of fear and get him to relax, "They're all fine, okay? They're right downstairs."

Steve stared at her and could see she was telling the truth. He looked away, taking a breath. He knew Nancy's room well and none of it was unfamiliar-- but hadn't been here in some time. He almost felt like a stranger in Nancy's bed where he'd held her so comfortably when the

Wheeler's had been out not three months ago.

He didn't belong here. He wanted to, but he didn't.

You shouldn't.

"Steve?"

He looked back at Nancy and she looked worried. He didn't know what to say to her. He didn't need to right then though, because she said,

"You were in the Upside Down, you remember that, right? We got you out."

"Yeah," he said, "I remember."

Nancy bit her lip and looked away. She turned back, now looking equally hurt to worried and said,

"Why would you do that? Why would let yourself get taken like that?"

Steve was caught off guard and blinked at her, stumbling over his words, "What're you-- what're you talking about--?"

"Dustin told me what happened!" She yelled back, standing up, "He told me that two demodogs were out in the woods and you went after both of them, alone."

Steve sighed heavily, shifting so that he was more upright to face her.

"I didn't 'go after them alone', those dipshits were out hunting demowhatevers to protect Will, apparently, and I went to keep them safe, okay?"

"No, you let those things get you, Steve!"

"I didn't--!"

Nancy took his hand in hers and showed him the long cut across his hand that he already knew was there.

EARLIER

"See, over there!" Dustin whispered, pointing through the trees at the demodog that was stalking around a glowing dimensional rip in space in a small clearing, "It opened up another portal!"

"We've gotta torch it." Mike said, eyeing the portal.

"Hey, hey, hey," Steve said, "We're not 'torching' anything, pyro, you guys are gonna go back home and quit chasing down--"

"Steve, its just gonna come for Will again!" Lucas interrupted.

Steve rolled his eyes, "Alright, fine, I will take care of it, but you guys need to get out of here, okay? We don't need anymore lost kids in this town."

Steve took his bat off his shoulder. Before any of the kids could stop him, he drew one of the nails sharply across his open palm. The kids all cursed or gasped as blood seeped through the fresh wound, and Steve squeezed his fist shut, drawing more blood.

"Are you insane?!" Max whispered.

Steve ignored her and raised his bat and started off for the demodog who already had its eyes on him.

"What--?! Steve!" Dustin whisper yelled after him, "You can't--"

"You want this, huh?!" Steve shouted at the dog who was preparing for attack.

"ARE YOU ACTUALLY INSANE?!" Mike shouted.

Lucas stared passed Steve towards the portal where a second demodog leapt through.

"Oh my god... guys... STEVE!" Lucas shouted.

Steve was yelling, twirling his bat at the demodog facing him, ready to pop it in the face. Behind him, the second dog was preparing for attack.

"STEVE, WATCH OUT!"

PRESENT

Steve took his injured hand from Nancy's and looked away from her.

"I didn't... it wasn't like I wanted to get taken, Nance. That place scares the shit out of me."

"No, you wanted them to come for you. You used yourself as bait, you-- you were willing to die."

Steve looked up and saw Nancy wasn't looking at him but she had tears in her eyes. He placed a gentle hand overtop of hers and said,

"Hey... c'mon... no," he looked to her, searching for her eyes, "I didn't... I don't want to die. I wanted to take them out. I wanted to protect the kids and if it was going to get one of us... I just... I had to save the kids."

Nancy turned her head, her eyes finally meeting his.

"Then who'd be there to save you?"